



Peculiar Meditative Praxis in Contemporary Theravāda Buddhism

In my earlier work entitled *The Origin and Development of Early Indian Contemplative Practices*, and in other material, I note the following.

Despite the proliferation of centres of Buddhist meditation and other Buddhist institutes promoting so-called vipassanā meditation in Eastern and Western religious and secular contexts, the actual method of vipassanā meditation, as depicted in the canonical sources of early Buddhism is unclear. With the odd exception, scholars and contemplatives of modern Theravāda Buddhism divorce the development of calm (*samatha*) from the methodical development of insight (*vipassanā*). With the advent of the Burmese *satipaññhāna* (mindfulness) method of meditation earlier this century, Theravāda Buddhism (largely but not entirely) speaks now of two contemplative methods. Of these, the systematic development of insight (*vipassanā*) solely via *satipaññhāna* meditation becomes elevated to the status of paramount practice. The development of jhānic skills now largely endures something of a contemporary eclipse. Nonetheless, the distinction between the practice of calm (*samatha*) and the practice of insight (*vipassanā*) is not explicit in the Pāli Suttas.

In order to determine the true character of the practice of vipassanā, research by Rod Bucknell compares ostensibly parallel lists of stages in the Buddhist course of practice. By doing so, the stage or stages that consistently come after the *jhānas* or *samādhi* are identified. In all of the lists examined, the *te-vijjā* (the "three knowledges") follows after the practice of the four *rāpa jhānas* and are positioned before the realisation of liberation (*vimutti*). Vipassanā holds the same sequential position as the "three knowledges". Consequently, vipassanā is presumed on the textual evidence to correspond with the *te-vijjā*.

If, as Bucknell has it, right insight (*sammā ñāḍa*) equals the "three knowledges" (*te-vijjā*), and these in turn are synonymous with the practice of insight (*vipassanā*), then the perfection of that practice must correspond with the direct, intuitive realisation of conditioned origination (*pañiccasamuppāda*) etc. With immediate insight, desire and ignorance are eliminated and the chain of cause and effect is broken. The suttas do not explicitly identify the method by which the meditator directs his mind to the successive realisation of the "three knowledges" (*te-vijjā*) and thereby attains release. This paper aims to clarify the above issue as presented in the early Buddhist texts by reference to my recent fieldwork involving peculiar meditative praxis found in contemporary Theravāda Buddhism, while evaluating some esoteric aspects of Theravāda Buddhism.



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